

The war of the words

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Why do so many of our children find reading a struggle? One camp says they're victims of a faddish teaching system that simply doesn't work. The other says that's "fascist" claptrap. Jane Cadzow meets the warring parties in the great reading debate.

Angus Ollerenshaw is a bright 12-year-old who until recently couldn't read. At least not properly. Because he is clever, Angus had memorised the appearance of enough frequently used words to give the impression of reading. But when it came to deciphering unfamiliar text, he was stumped.

His mother, Louise Ollerenshaw, herself a primary school teacher, was so concerned that earlier this year she enrolled Angus in a remedial reading clinic at Sydney's Macquarie University. The 10-week program included intensive instruction in "phonics" - the correlation between letters and speech sounds. Angus responded immediately. Suddenly, the printed page made sense to him. "He actually said that the fog disappeared," says Louise, whose son is happier and more confident since doing the course. All his school work - even his maths - has improved. More than that, he is picking up books and reading them for pleasure. "He's a changed boy, totally," she says.

Think of Angus Ollerenshaw as one of the saved. About a quarter of Australian primary students have serious difficulty learning to read. According to Professor Kevin Wheldall, who runs the clinic Angus attended, almost all those children would benefit from explicit instruction in letter-sound relationships. But teaching phonics is out of fashion in our schools, and has been for more than 20 years. Phonics is an "f" word, Wheldall says with a despairing laugh.

At the University of Melbourne, psychology professor Margot Prior believes a rethink is urgently needed. "There are thousands of children who can't read and who aren't getting the kind of instruction they need," says Prior. "It's absolutely criminal, it really is."

School principal John Fleming agrees. "We're letting kids down - not allowing them to reach their full potential - because we're not teaching them the way they should be taught," says Fleming, who has overseen an extraordinary transformation at Bellfield Primary in Melbourne's inner-north since he turned against the trend and introduced a reading program that includes rigorous phonics instruction. In 1996, the year he became principal, more than four-fifths of his pupils were reading at lower than the minimum acceptable standard for their age group, he says. Seven years later, there has been a

spectacular reversal. Statewide literacy tests now put Bellfield in the top 10 per cent of schools in Victoria.

More than half Bellfield's 220 students live in single-parent households and a fifth come from non-English-speaking families. More than 80 per cent of their parents are unemployed. "This is an exceptionally disadvantaged area," says Fleming, "yet our kids' results are absolutely outstanding and improving all the time." As he sees it, there is no secret to the success. "We teach phonics in a systematic, structured manner daily - and that's what all schools need to do."

The debate over the teaching of reading is so long-running, so bitter and divisive that, in the United States, it is known as the Reading Wars. In Australia, the dispute "can be quite personal and vitriolic," says Victorian education consultant Kevin Donnelly. "It's quite emotional." On one side are phonics advocates, who say research shows conclusively that reading instruction is most effective when it includes specific teaching about the way letters represent sounds, and how those sounds combine to form words - /th/-/i/-/ck/, for instance, or /sh/-/o/-/pp/-/ing/.

On the other side are proponents of the so-called "whole-language" philosophy which is under challenge in the US and Britain but continues to hold sway in Australian classrooms. Whole-language adherents say teaching kids to break words into pieces is tedious and unnecessary, because learning to read is as natural as learning to speak: if children are "immersed in print" - exposed to a wide variety of books filled with compelling stories and appealing pictures - they will pretty much figure it out for themselves.

The phonics camp dismisses the learning by-osmosis theory as wishful thinking. The whole-language crowd writes off phonics promoters as jack-booted disciplinarians nostalgic for the rote learning and mindless chanting ("bat, cat, fat, mat, sat") of an earlier era. "You often hear the expression 'drill and kill'," says Melbourne educational psychologist Kerry Hempenstall, a phonics supporter who knows the price of expressing his views: "I've been called a fascist from time to time." The initiator of an RMIT University course that trains parents to tutor children who haven't learned to read at school, Hempenstall shrugs off the vilification. "I've been copping it for so long it doesn't bother me much," he says.

Slander, slanging matches, frosty silences. Susan Farrell, now at Warrnambool Primary, in south-western Victoria, taught in a school in the late '70s "where the phonetic teachers sat on one side of the staffroom and the whole-language teachers sat on the other side. No common ground."

If the passion seems surprising, keep in mind that the ability to translate written language into speech is the single most important skill we acquire in a lifetime. And studies indicate that the method of teaching can have a lasting effect on our mastery of it. In a joint article in Scientific American magazine last year, a group of five US researchers - professors of psychology, linguistics and pediatrics - noted that "although many parents might think that

innate intelligence will govern how well their kids learn to read no matter what type of instruction is given, the evidence suggests otherwise".

The professors said IQ had little bearing on early reading ability. What's more, they said, differences in early proficiency did not necessarily wash out over time: a Canadian study showed that reading facility in the first year of school was a good indication of reading prowess in 11th grade. In other words, children who got off to a bad start were unlikely to catch up with their classmates. Why? "Because reading requires practice," they said, "and those who excel end up practising the most." For parents, gauging progress can be tricky. At Macquarie University, Kevin Wheldall says children who have not learned to read can often seem to be doing quite well until the age of about eight, when the number of words they need to remember by sight starts getting too big to hold in their heads. "Then you have kids hitting the wall," he says.

Education consultant Kevin Donnelly might have been expected to pick up reading problems, but it wasn't until his daughter Amelia was in Year 4 at a Melbourne primary school that he realised she was floundering. Like Angus Ollerenshaw, Amelia had committed such a large vocabulary to visual memory that she convincingly imitated reading. When Donnelly and Amelia's mother Julia became aware that she couldn't tackle new words, "we went up and spoke to the teacher, as parents do, and we were told not to get anxious," he says. "We were told that it was developmental - that Amelia would grow into it. And frankly, that was all rubbish. So Julia and I sat down with Amelia and taught her how to read over three or four months."

No aspect of education has been researched more exhaustively than reading instruction. Thanks to hundreds of studies over the past couple of decades, we not only know a lot about the mental processing that underlies reading, we know from a scientific viewpoint the best way to teach it. In December 2000, the US government released *Teaching Children to Read*, a hefty report based on a re-examination of all the available research. The finding was unambiguous: instruction that includes systematic phonics produces higher achievement than instruction that doesn't. While no one suggests phonics is enough on its own, its crucial role in teaching kids to read is one of the firmest conclusions in all of behavioural science.

Bellfield principal John Fleming wonders why the whole-language forces aren't waving the white flag. "They haven't got a leg to stand on," he says. "They are trying to defend the indefensible." But Margot Prior at Melbourne University has long sensed in the whole language movement a kind of evangelical zeal. "I've always thought of it as almost a religious thing," says Prior. "And it's very hard to unconvert people from their religion."

The phonics team may have won the credibility contest, but whole-language devotees still have control of classrooms. Psychologist Marion de Lemos points with dismay to the gulf between the type of reading instruction proven to get the best results and the type that prevails in this country. "Most children do need specific instruction to make the connection between sounds and

letters," says de Lemos, author of a report on literacy teaching published by the Australian Council for Educational Research. "And many Australian children are not getting it."

The main concession has been new terminology, says Kerry Hempenstall. "The expression that's often used now is 'balanced instruction', the assertion being that we've taken the best from phonics and the best from whole-language and combined them to make a mutually acceptable system." It is obvious to Hempenstall that we have done no such thing. In most classrooms, letter-sound relationships are mentioned only in passing, he says. "That's called incidental phonics. It's not the systematic phonics that has been recommended as effective in making a difference." Marion de Lemos, likewise, sees no sign of genuine reform: "They say, 'Yes, phonics is important. Yes, we do phonics.' But if you look at their program, very little has actually changed."

What's odd in Australia is the apparent lack of community concern. Overseas, the row over teaching methods has made headlines and prompted petitions, but here hostilities have been largely confined to literacy conferences and the columns of academic journals. When de Lemos's damning report came out last year, it sank without trace, completely ignored by the mainstream media.

The whole-language classroom is relaxed and cheery, with desks arranged in clusters rather than in rows facing the front, and a comfortable library corner furnished with cushions. In early grades, the children gather on the floor around the chair of the teacher, who reads to them from outsize books, pointing to the words as she goes. This process is repeated until the class can "read" along with the story. The idea is that, by watching the text and joining in with the teacher, by playing word games and spending their days in a "print-rich" environment, the kids will absorb the essentials of reading without the need for much formal instruction.

Each afternoon, they take home little books to read with their parents, who have been warned against "sounding out" words or pouncing on mistakes. "It is unpleasant to be corrected," says popular Australian children's author Paul Jennings, a whole-language enthusiast and former teacher. In *The Reading Bug*, his recent how-to book for adults intent on instilling a love of literature in their offspring, Jennings insists that learning to read cannot be a chore. "It has to be fun, fun, fun," he says, and stopping to sound out words detracts from the enjoyment. Instead, children should feel free to glide over difficult parts of a text, substituting their own words if they cannot read those on the page.

Take the sentence, "I use soap to wash my face." One child might read it as, "I use soap to watch my face." Another might read, "I use soap to clean my face." Jennings says the second child's response is better "because they have guessed based on meaning [clean instead of wash]". Should the child who reads "clean" be corrected? No, he says. "We don't want to interrupt the flow . Parents get hung up on word-for-word accuracy."

Australian Literacy Educators' Association president Jan Turbill says her advice to parents would be: "Yes, the word 'clean' makes sense. Let it go. Parents shouldn't be judgemental."

In the US, leading literacy researcher Louisa Moats vehemently disagrees with Jennings and Turbill. "That's just so misguided and wrongheaded," says Moats, director of a four-year study of reading education by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in Washington. "It does matter that the child is reading the wrong word."

Moats has seen no evidence that structured teaching puts children off reading. On the contrary, she says, kids find phonics empowering: "The whole point of an alphabetic writing system is that you can decode an unknown word when you come to it. And the fact is that children love mastering the code. As soon as they can, they will bravely go ahead and try to read just about anything you put in front of them."

That is certainly the experience at Bellfield Primary, where students are taught sentence building - grammar and punctuation - as well as word construction. "There's a lot of repetition, revision and reinforcement," says John Fleming, who has little time for the popular notion that children learn best when allowed to discover things for themselves. "Whole-language teachers are babysitting kids rather than teaching them," he says. At Bellfield, "we have taken back the ground that teachers should always have had. We are saying, 'Yes, we will teach kids the skills that they need.'"

About 25 per cent of children learn to read with little assistance and no apparent effort. For these kids, says Kevin Wheldall, the whole-language approach is perfectly okay: leave them alone with a good book and they're fine. For a second group - perhaps half of all children - the method of teaching isn't of make-or-break significance. Phonics training might help them read sooner and more easily but they will muddle through without it. "Provided they are afforded some sort of instruction on a relatively regular basis, they will pick up reading in the time period that we've come to regard as normal," he says. (Most kids can read most texts with reasonable fluency by the age of 11.)

It's the third group Wheldall worries about. "There are 20 to 25 per cent of kids who are always going to struggle to learn to read unless they get intensive, systematic, skills-based instruction," he says. "And they are the ones who have been failed in particular by the whole-language movement."

Research in the past two decades has debunked some of the central tenets of whole language instruction. For instance, computer monitored eye-movement studies indicate that, rather than skimming through text, gleaning the meaning by sampling words here and there, as whole-language theorists contended, we read virtually every word and every letter. Recent brain studies suggest that even the most skilled readers rapidly sound out words in their heads (though many remain convinced that we are able to whiz through a page of print because our knowledge of phonics has made word recognition

automatic). As for the contention that reading is as natural as talking, Kerry Hempenstall points out that "every culture has a form of oral language but relatively few cultures have a written language, and even fewer an alphabetic language like ours. It's very much an invention, and it ain't natural."

Sydney cognitive scientist Max Coltheart says reading is at least as artificial and complex a skill as piano-playing. "No one is going to suggest that rote learning and drill aren't essential if you're going to be a good piano player," Coltheart says. "Why is reading any different? The whole-language approach would be to say, 'We'll just have lots of pianos around the house and let the child listen to a lot of music and he'll be playing a lot of concertos.' It's not going to happen."

Kevin Wheldall regrets that "education is not a profession based on the results of scientific research. Teachers seem to prefer to fly by the seat of their pants." Confronted with empirical evidence of the superiority of a particular teaching technique, they are, in Wheldall's experience, capable of saying, "But I don't like doing that. It sounds boring. I'd rather do it my way."

The whole-language camp tends to discount the research as irrelevant, or worse: Brian Cambourne, an associate professor in Wollongong University's education faculty, believes the pro-phonics side is drumming up a nonexistent literacy crisis in order to panic parents into putting their children into private schools. "I see it as a long-term attempt to destabilise the public school system," he says.

The idea that phonics advocacy is a rightwing conspiracy has considerable support in the US, where whole-language adherents point to the Bush administration's push for the inclusion of phonics in reading programs. But literacy authority Louisa Moats impatiently dismisses the attempt to link phonics and conservative politics as "just absolute nonsense . We view it as an issue of science, not politics - or religion."

British research suggests reading standards have worsened significantly in the whole language era. In Australia, no such data is available. What we do know is that a fifth of second-year primary school children require individual tuition in catch-up courses such as Reading Recovery, which cost Victoria about \$28 million a year, NSW more than \$20 million. Kerry Hempenstall sees in-school remedial programs as "an attempt to make up for the failure of the initial teaching. It's a bit like, 'With every Ford Edsel, you get a free tow truck.'"

Most teachers are too busy getting through the day to follow esoteric arguments about reading instruction. Many feel, quite understandably, that they know from experience what works best. At Warrnambool Primary, Year 4 teacher Susan Farrell says she has tried both the phonics and whole-language methods and now tries to apply a bit of both, adjusting the mix to meet individual needs. "Some children have just never worked out that there are patterns in words," Farrell says. For these kids, phonics instruction can come as a profound relief: "They just stare at you. Like, 'How come no one

ever told me this before?' But the truth is, most kids don't need it taught explicitly."

Sydney primary teacher Annie Rees agrees instruction needs to be tailored to different children's strengths and weaknesses. "I'm very wary about people who get on bandwagons and push that they've got the solution," she says, "because all children are different." Rees is similarly sceptical about suggestions that whole-language is responsible for a perceived decline in children's reading proficiency. She says she started teaching in 1979, before whole-language took hold, "and we always had people struggling with reading then, too".

Anyway, the phonics advocates' quarrel is not really with teachers but with the educationists in universities and government departments who influence what is taught in schools. "The education boffins have got it wrong," says Bellfield Primary's John Fleming. According to Chris Woodhead, former chief executive of Britain's curriculum council, we "have a situation where the people at the top are espousing the wrong theories and the people coming up through the system have to agree with them if they're going to get promoted". Marion de Lemos finds it inexplicable that teacher training colleges still preach whole-language ideology to the profession's new recruits. "Either they don't look at the research evidence or they simply ignore it," she says.

Children from poor families are the main casualties of the reading wars, because they are the ones whose future reading skill is most dependent on what happens in the classroom. Kerry Hempenstall puts the failure rate among economically disadvantaged children at anything up to 60 per cent. "Are we prepared to wear that?" he asks. "How big a problem are we prepared to have before we do something about it?"

INSET: The teaching of reading has always aroused strong feelings. And it sometimes seems the argument goes in circles.

The phonics method was the norm in English-speaking countries until the mid-19th century, when reformists decided it would be better to teach children to recognise whole words without sounding them out, in the way that skilled readers were thought to do. This "whole-word" (as opposed to "whole-language") approach prevailed until 1955, when US academic Rudolf Flesch launched a withering attack on it in his best-selling book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Calling for a return to phonics teaching, Flesch blamed the poor standard of literacy in American schools on the use of "horrible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers, the stuff and guff about Dick and Jane." Not only were the primers dull, he fumed, they were inflicted on children in the mistaken belief that recognising words in repetitive texts - dialogue like "Look, look" and "Yes, yes" and "See the funny, funny animal" - would lead naturally to an understanding of letter-sound relationships. In fact, he said, "first and second-graders in our public schools are not taught to read at all, as shown by the fact that there isn't a single book on the market that they can manage to read by themselves".

In response, a textbook publisher challenged children's author Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr Seuss, to write a story both enthralling and dead simple. "The Cat in the Hat is 1702 words long," wrote Louis Menand in The New Yorker last December, "but it uses only 220 different words. And (as the cat says) that is not all. Geisel put the whole thing into rhymed anapestic dimeter. It was a tour de force and it killed Dick and Jane."

Published in 1957, The Cat ushered in a new era of reading instruction. Fewer primers. A heavy emphasis on phonics, which in turn came under fire in the late 1970s and '80s from the leaders of the whole-language revolution. Their theory was that good readers didn't break words into pieces or even read word by- word. Instead, they skipped through text, getting the overall meaning by playing a "psycholinguistic guessing game". By the 1990s, the whole language philosophy was dominant in the US, Britain and New Zealand. But nowhere had it been embraced with greater alacrity than in Australia.

At the University of Melbourne, psychology professor Margot Prior notes that our educators seem particularly susceptible to fads. "I think it's to do with our isolation and our sense of newness as a country," Prior says. "If it comes from America - and they're such good salespeople - we buy it."

Coloured glasses to help kids read, travel-sickness tablets as a cure for dyslexia. We'll try anything once. "There's some weird and wonderful stuff, believe me," says Professor Kevin Wheldall, at Sydney's Macquarie University. "It sometimes seems that in education, we don't see progress, we merely see changes of fashion."